WHEN ONLY THE BIGGEST WILL DO:
GETTING BANG FOR YOUR FUNDING BUCKS

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In the ongoing struggle to resolve the issue of arts funding in this country, new initiatives, consortiums, inquiries and restructures abound. Over the past several years, we have experienced the Major Performing Arts Inquiry, Securing the Future, popularly known as the Nagert Report [1999], the Saatchi and Saatchi Report [2002] assessing general community attitudes to the arts, the Contemporary Visual Arts Craft Inquiry otherwise known as the Myer Report [2002], the almost immediately forgotten Cultural Ministers’ Council inquiry into the boxed called ‘small to medium performing arts sector’ [2002], Ian Roberts’s analysis of the triennially funded theatre organisations of the Theatre Board of the Australia Council [2003], the Positive Solutions report on the parlous condition of dance [2004] and the Orchestra Review was undertaken by James Strong [2005].

Currently and in the wake of the Australia Council’s recent restructure, scoping studies are being undertaken on the New Media Arts Sector and the Community Cultural Development Sector.

Some of these inquiries and reports—the Nagert, the Myer and James Strong’s Orchestra—certainly much in more money and improved conditions for the arts forms and/or organisations involved. Others, notably those involving the ‘small to medium sector’ did not. In use of the New Media and CCD Boards, scoping reports into their impact and achievements are now being undertaken. It seems probable that you dissolve the board first and then commission the study, then that’s probably because it is. One thing’s for sure—a burgeoning industry of consultants has arisen over the past decade and there are definitely days I wish I earned what they earn!

So why all the inquiries? Inquiries are developed to provide empirical evidence about the things we think we already know—in bold terms they are a means of articulating hopefully comprehensive, substantiated arguments to take government to justify greater spending. It might be argued that all these inquiries are a symptom of a fundamental flaw in the way the arts are supposed to be funded. One might even say there’s a crisis. Pleading government to adopt the recommendations can be ‘The Arts, as one Labor politician said to me, ‘have no door knock appeal’. Still, experience teaches that it’s those arts forms and organisations that are in sufficient political and financial clout that are most likely to get the runs on the board.

Consequently, funding increases are tied to scale and turnover, the market place or to those organisations that are perceived, usually because of their size and turnover, as ‘trumpet producers and presenters’—typically flagship institutions, such as State and national galleries and museums, ballet and opera companies and State orchestras. The Myer Report was a notable exception, in that small organisations including contemporary arts and craft organisations did achieve modest funding increases and importantly, additionally, it was tied to State allocations has been made available to individual practitioners through the Visual Arts and Craft Board. The Myer Report very accurately defined the market for more money and with all due respect to the consultants on appointed on project, they could not bring the level of professional church and respect achieved by Rupert Murdoch’s film generation funding agencies seemed half-hearted. The sector, being dispersed and disparate was unable to work effectively and advocacy and had little capacity to share information towards a coherent response —furthermore, the research was inadequate and the figures often incorrect. You get what you pay for. More importantly it did not seem to have the imprimatur of Federal Government from the outset, led to a substantial report with positive outcomes.

Published in late 2002, the recommendations from Myer (now known as the Contemporary Visual Arts Craft Strategy) took some time to be taken up by government—in implementation necessitating a cooperative approach between Federal, State and Territorial governments—sometimes described as the ‘road to harmony’ [sic]. Consequently its impact varies widely depending where you live. After much behind the scenes argument and ups and downs, lobbying, the budget was allocated, apparently according to popular density and whatever financial contribution individual States and Territories were willing to contribute. Some States stretched credibility by claiming that any new money given to the visual arts in previous years was their contribution to the Strategy. New South Wales and Victoria did very well, while smaller States and Territories [South Australia, Northern Territory and the Australian Capital Territory for instance] did not, which had a lot to do with the lack of commitment and/or investment by their respective governments. What seems clear, however, is that if there hadn’t been the political will at a Federal level to increase the support to the visual arts from the outset, then the Inquiry would never have got off the ground.

In October 2000, the Cultural Minister’s Council commissioned report into the ‘small to medium’ performing arts sector. Primarily driven by the States, relatively little money went into arts and crafts with the market place through the demonstrable economic contribution made by the visual arts/crafts overall and through ‘a big picture’ approach, which considered the role of commercial galleries, indigenous art and the export market and the role of collectors among other things. Combined with strong advocacy from the field over many years, substantial research and advocacy undertaken by organisations such as NAVA and the Australia Council, not to mention the support of the Federal Government from the outset, led to a substantial report with positive outcomes.

As noted above, these triennially funded companies, which might be understood as peer organisations to contemporary art and craft organisations, given their emphasis on the creation of new Australian work, do not have an effective professional network—they are small, overreached and under-researched and funding has remained erratic in real terms for years. While Roberts’s analysis is acute, his research informed and his recommendations practical, the only recommendation that seems to have been adopted by government to date is an increase in touring funded through Playing Australia.

This brings me to the ill-considered and premature demise of the New Media Arts and Community Cultural Development Boards [CCDB] of the Australia Council and the restriction currently in train. Discussion around the eons of these boards has been extensive and I don’t intend to reiterate all the arguments here. However, the axing of these boards, undertakings without consultation, without regard for stakeholders, without regard for originating, creative artists—whom in their collective funding—might be understood as part of a trend that has gained momentum over the past decade. It may be unwarrantable. I’m not suggesting there’s a conspiracy as such, but there is an increasingly unpalatable emphasis on big projects, big initiatives, big companies driven by big marketing that produce big results—whatever that means. New Media’s budget was seen as too small, relative to its administrative costs to make it worthwhile commissioning New media artists working individually or in small teams didn’t carry a lot of political clout and despite demonstrable national and international recognition, they’re not recognised as ‘real’ artists within the Australia Council, which may have been why increasing New Media’s tiny budget was never an option.

One of the rationales given for collapsing these boards was to reduce administration costs—which always sounds good—thence improving conditions for the ‘small to medium sector’. However, on that point, why the Dance Board wasn’t merged with the Theatre Board, which seems to me to make a lot more sense. To date the structure has cost more than $1.5 million—two new boards have been established and several departments have been reorganised. Some staff have been lost—however given payouts and the appointment of the newly empowered arts form directors, it will be interesting to see what, if any, savings have been made and whom those savings will benefit.

Ironically, while New Media mostly initially came from the performing arts, that money would now be distributed primarily to Visual Arts/Craft Board, but also to the Music Board. Hybrid models have proven too close to the newly established Inter-arts Board. The VACB is arguably a board that supports contemporary practice. The Music Board on the other hand is highly conservative. With one exception, Music Board members come from a background in classical music. This is not encouraging for contemporary music practitioners. For those artists, the applied arts, the impact of the loss of CCD and New Media monies to artists working in theatre and dance does not seem to have been considered.

When the Federal Budget was announced in May, this year, it remarked included a $46 million dollar—$11 million to the community arts sector—those that had the potential to transform the ways the arts are created and experienced in this country. Where did get by far the majority, $25.4 went to the country and regional sector—State symphony orchestras; two pit orchestras [Opera Victoria and the Australian Opera and Ballet] and two Territory orchestras—taking their collective funding from $57 million in 2004 to $81 million in 2005. An additional $9.9 million went to the Multidisciplinary and Western Australian arts sector, supporting arts companies to maintain essential service. People may be aware that James Strong’s report had recommended culling the size of some orchestras [three of them carry long-term deficits, nothing States in States with smaller populations. Beyond the orchestras, $3.5 million over four years went to the Melbourne Performing Arts Board [MPAB]. $2.5 million went to continue the Young and Emerging Artists program and hefty $55 million over four years went to the National Theatre Fellowship. In all, the Federal Government has cut-deep into the already pretty meagre money which many would already consider cuts. In the discussion on the reconsideration of the the role of arts and cultural organisations and of the arts industry to society, that it seems rather have disappeared.

On the contrary, the restructure of the Australian Council has been paid to have a substantial to medium sector.
BASKET WOULD DO YOUR

As noted above, these triennial funded monies which might be understood as peer organisations to contemporary art and craft organisations, given their emphasis on the creation of new Australian work, do not have an effective professional network—they are small, overcrowded and under-funded and funding has remained static in real terms for years. Whilst Roberts’ analysis is astute, his research informed and his recommendations practical, the only recommendation that seems to have been lost is to have a designated government office to distribute, in an ongoing way, funding through toured Funding Projects.

This brings me to the ill-considered and premature demise of the new Media Arts and Community Cultural Development Board (CCDB) of the Australian Council and the structure currently in train.

Discussion around the cutting of these boxes has been extensive and I don’t intend to reiterate all the arguments here. However, the axing of these boxes, undertaken without consultation, with no regard for stakeholder interests, without regard for longstanding, creative artists, with boards which had the potential to transform the way the arts are created and experienced in this country, is a serious stain.

When the Federal Budget was announced in May this year, it remarkably included a $4 million dollar increase in funding for all cultural arts, a move which had the potential to transform the way the arts are created and experienced in this country. This is what the government’s arts and culture investment was—a State orchestra, two pit orchestras (Opera Victoria and the Australian Opera and Ballet Orchestra, the NT orchestra—taking their collective funding from $57 million in 2004 to $81 million in 2005. An additional $9.9 million went to the Queensland. Added to that was a $1.5 million to the Australian orchestra to help those companies maintain ensemble status quo. People may be aware that James Strong’s report had recommended cutting the size of some orchestras (those of them carry long-term deficits), notably those in States with smaller populations. Beyond the orchestras, $3.9 million over four years was allocated to the Major Performing Arts Board (MPAB) $2.5 million went to continue the Young and Emerging Artists program and a hefty $5.5 million over four years went to the Noise Festival, which given the appalling conditions youth arts organisations suffer in this country, I find disturbing.

It is of course a wonderful thing for any organisation to receive an unaccountably much-needed increase, particularly when that increase is tied to improved conditions and wages for [some] artists. Nor am I opposed to artists getting the opportunity to work on big projects, but leaving aside the Minister Bronde, it has to be said that those opportunities don’t come around too often for visual contemporary artists. Moreover, it is grotesque that the disparities between the small to medium sector and the ‘majors’ continues to grow. It is a little like the appearance of of current social realities—just look at what is happening in education (and of course the rich really get richer)—even when, or particularly when, they are carrying massive deficits. I seem to remember, although I may be hallucinating, when there was some acknowledgement that funding existed in deficit in the past. Now it seems that funding is about excusing them, rationalised through the familiar but disingenuous concept of the ‘trickle down’ effect.

One of the other outcomes of the Australia Council’s review is the establishment of the Key Organisations Unit. This means that recurrently funded organisations will have their business plans assessed by that unit, while their artistic programs will be assessed by the appropriate art form board. There has been an increasing emphasis on business planning over the past few years, which has perhaps supplanted the previous emphasis on marketing. While issues such as governance, stakeholder relations, financial viability and so on are indispensable, important, the fact remains that while the small and medium-sized sector—those organisations primarily responsible for producing and facilitating contemporary practice in this country—remains under-resourced and overworked, a business plan may not actually offer anything else other than provide a tool for administrative accountability. This is a sector that has been taken, mean and effective forever.

Despite its success against the odds, at the local, national and international levels, contemporary practice in the visual arts, theatre, dance, new media and hybrid forms remain utterly marginal.

As always, the task for artists, cultural workers and their differing and overlapping communities is to transcend government and funding agencies polices through their ideas, talent and tenacity. It is at these levels that the fundamental level of culture is not only created, but also transformed and it is here that real changes might be made that finally celebrate this country’s unique heritage, its living artists and possible futures. Let’s be clear about it—by recognition, I mean financial recognition. By recognition, I mean initiating artists as opposed to interpreted artists and living ones as opposed to dead ones. I think to resist the ‘cultural’ approach entirely, however surely now is time to loosen the balance. At the moment, however, all the signs seem set to perpetuate the exploitation of initiating artists as the workshop labour of the much touted cultural industry.